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Places We've Been

Abstract

We are in the trunk of my grandmother's Toyota, bound and gagged. Muffled grunts come from your end of the trunk: your face engaged in an awkward conversation with my shoes. I wish for a way to make you more comfortable, but there isn't much wiggle room in here. There is nothing we can do but try to relax. Wait. We've been here before; we know how it's going to play out. My grandmother will drive for a couple more miles, until we are thoroughly lost, then she will dump your body on the side of the road, drive home, send me to bed without dinner. It is comforting at least to know where we'll be at the end of the night. And yet, I feel anxious. I cannot help wondering if this latest kidnapping will be the final straw, if even now you are weighing the options in your mind and finding my baggage too heavy.

Keywords

friendship

Cover Page Footnote

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Places We've Been

by Hasan Friggle

- I. Toyota
- II. Bathtub
- III. Teenagers
- IV. Satellite
- V. Subway
- VI. Sleep
- VII. Hollywood

I. We are in the trunk of my grandmother's Toyota, bound and gagged. Muffled grunts come from your end of the trunk: your face engaged in an awkward conversation with my shoes. I wish for a way to make you more comfortable, but there isn't much wiggle room in here. There is nothing we can do but try to relax. Wait. We've been here before; we know how it's going to play out. My grandmother will drive for a couple more miles, until we are thoroughly lost, then she will dump your body on the side of the road, drive home, send me to bed without dinner. It is comforting at least to know where we'll be at the end of the night. And yet, I feel anxious. I cannot help wondering if this latest kidnapping will be the final straw, if even now you are weighing the options in your mind and finding my baggage too

heavy. I picture all the possible ways you could leave me and force myself to watch them over and over. I exhaust myself. Suddenly the car jolts to a stop, and I throw up a little in my mouth. I hear a door open, then the slow shuffle of rheumatic footsteps on asphalt. The trunk opens. We both shudder and recoil from the light, like worms. Grandma reaches down and hoists you effortlessly onto her shoulder. There is a pale footprint on your cheek. We make eye contact as our eyes pass. Then you are gone, and I hear the thud of your body on the road. When Grandma comes back she gives me a look of stern sadness, like she is a very old and holy mountain upon which I have trespassed. My family is protective. They do not understand the nature of our relationship. But I have faith; I know that one day they will come around. In the meantime we keep running, keep hiding. There is nowhere to go where my grandmother cannot find us, but we will have a few hours, here and there. On the way home I think about how good life can be. I would whistle if I could.

II. We are naked in a tub. Your mom is sitting on the toilet talking to my mom through the phone. They are either gossiping or having an argument. You are leering at me over an absurdly large yellow ducky. I am three years old and shy. You are four and aggressive for your age. Under the water you are wagging my genitals with your toes. Above, your eyes dare me to act surprised. This occurs to me instinctively as the sort of thing your mom would disapprove of so I look off toward the faucet and try my best to act uninvolved. In the faucet my reflection is distorted. I frown at myself, feeling dour and unattractive. I close my eyes and try to release tension. The soapy water is at my back. Bath toys bump my shoulder gently in the surf. I allow myself to sink into a warm effervescent sea somewhere beyond the reaches of the mind. The water is dark, and the sky is dark, and I feel like I have woken up in the grave, and I feel cradled and safe. But the memory of you persists, tugging at me like a faint reminder that will not let go. Under the water I begin to grow. I become more and more until I am indistinguishable from the darkness. All of me rises, looking for more space to inhabit. The world seems to sharpen and narrow as I am hurled upward at a pinprick of light that opens up as I near it. I see the yellow water-damaged ceiling of your bathroom; I see your mom pressed against the sink, slowly turning her face back and forth in the mirror, still on the phone; and I see you, looking down at me, a victorious smirk on your face. I spew out of the drain and pool at your feet and submit myself to your splashing.

III. We are teenagers in a room filled with grownups. They are wearing expensive, silky-looking outfits in solid color arrangements. The men speak into their various devices. The women alternate between ignoring us and glaring at us. *Why are you*

here, they hiss. *You are too young*. We've heard it already, from our parents, our therapists, our guidance counselors. Nobody understands. They are old and have forgotten the intensity with which a body can rage. We are doing this out of a need to express it and allow it to manifest in the world as something that lives and breathes. Youth is just another of our strengths that we stretch and flaunt. Suddenly, the hushed routine of the room is interrupted by a high-pitched scream, followed by a snarl, low and carnal. Everyone glances up at the door through which a great number of women have already disappeared. The ones who are left eye their bellies with hesitation. Please don't hurt me, they are thinking. But you—you roll your eyes and continue flipping through a magazine. My love for you rises like an animal inside me. It is boundless and infinitely greater than all the other love in this room, like the sun before a cluster of flickering candles. When our turn finally comes and the doctor pulls it from you, red and furious, we will return to the world victorious, carrying it over our heads like a trophy. Then everyone will know, as we do, how far our love can go. Back at school, the other less-serious couples will watch us walk down the hallway holding hands and gape, only able to guess at the depth of the bond between us.

IV. We are circling the Earth in a satellite we built ourselves, using spare bits of this and that from the garage. With the blues, whites, and yellows of our home planet shifting peacefully beneath us, we begin to celebrate the successful outcome of our mission. There are a lot of handshakes, followed by hugging, just like in the movies. We say things like *Mission accomplished* and *Good job, lieutenant*, then blush at our workplace formality. I pull out the victory joint. We call it that though we both know that we would have smoked it no matter the outcome. There is one thing, however, that we overlooked. The matches will not light in space. They spark for a moment, then fizzle out and die. We go through match after match; we huddle around them; we try breathing in reverse to produce oxygen, but it's hopeless. When we get to the last match we strike it simply for the spiteful pleasure of watching it die. I put the joint back in my pocket, and you rest your head on my shoulder, and together we sit and orbit the planet and wait until enough time has passed for us to go home. Down below, I think I can see my mom stumbling through the yard, tripping on leftover garage detritus as she goes to hang the wash up to dry.

V. We are in a subway car that is slowly filling up with water. It's my first time on the train. I've come to the city to visit you like I promised, and you are showing it to me from the inside like you promised. I purchased four postcards today, intending to send them to myself back home and pretend they had come from you. Now they are floating down by the ankle of a man in a suit who is already dead. We were in transit between one famous street and another when the collision occurred, and now we are

hanging from poles with the water only a couple feet away. It is rather dramatic. Almost fitting, in a way. I have always sensed that there was something grand and tragic lurking at the heart of our story: the difference in age and opportunity, the slow deterioration of our long-distance relationship. Unfortunately we are not the only survivors. There is one other man, a tourist, hanging on for life beside me. I want to play my role correctly and deliver a heartfelt goodbye, but the presence of this other man, this tourist, is intruding on what was going to be our moment. He will not stop weeping and imploring with us in a language we cannot understand. *Cualson ple bloto?! he cries, staring earnestly.* I ignore him and look down at my toes, which are beginning to feel damp. Below, the ex-passengers are floating up to meet us. I look into your eyes, and I know that you are feeling what I'm feeling. I want to talk about it. I want to say all the things and have all the conversations, but I can't get a word in over this tourist. His face is red from exertion, and his voice has a vaguely choked quality to it as though someone were doing a half-assed job of strangling him. *Por nach sagadai afkkk!! he screams.* Carefully, I loosen one hand from the pole and use it to reach out and tickle him, gently, in the armpit. He begins to howl, twisting violently back and forth, spewing us with curses and spittle. It isn't long before he lets go. There is a splash, and the water briefly blooms red. We both look up slowly. Your mouth is a perfect O. I watch you watch me as we hang in silence, surrounded by the roar of the water and the soft thud of corpses on the walls. Then your mouth cracks, and you giggle. I giggle as well. Soon we are both laughing like we haven't laughed in years. Oh the city, I think. It's everything I thought it would be.

VI. We are lying in bed, asleep. I sit up and look out across an impossible distance. Our bed now stretches as far as the eye can see. You are still asleep, wrapped in the tangle of blankets that have migrated, once again, to your side of the bed (if our bed can still be described as having sides). I stand up, balancing awkwardly on the springy surface, and walk out onto that endless expanse of linen headed for the horizon. It is a bleak, unvaried landscape; I crane for a glimpse of something different. When I turn around I see that, after just a few steps, your huddled form has become a speck in the distance, a smudge threatening to disappear altogether should I take another step or blink too forcefully. I am overcome by a wave of nausea, the need to sit down. I tell myself that I should return, that I shouldn't allow you to wake up alone and confused. I tell myself that you need me, but even I am not that good of a liar. I am the needy one, standing here on the border of all things known, trembling with fear. If our roles were reversed, you would not hesitate to walk away, heeding only your curiosity, and when I awoke it would be in our normal bed, you having already saved the day. But I want to be the competent one for once, the hero galloping his steed across the mattress to rescue you from your distress.

VII. We are in a Hollywood movie. The big kiss is coming up. My hands feel slick on the wheel. You are slumped in the passenger seat with your forehead on the window and your eyes closed. I am unsure of whether or not you are conscious. Your mouth and the glass are caught in a sluggish game of tug of war over a small patch of foggy breath. Buckled up and stuffed into stockings, your legs seem oddly large and angular. I wonder if they are Photoshopped to make them seem more vulnerable, more inclined to yield to the fingers of the strange men who frequent newsvendor stalls. You emit a vaguely alcoholic odor that is still mesmerizing this early in the morning. I want to breathe and breathe until you are incorporated into my lungs. Then I could take you with me at the end of this shoot, and our half-assed promises to keep in touch need never be tested. People are running around outside, moving equipment, arranging lighting. But in here everything sounds slow and soupy, as though it were all happening underwater. Perhaps I'm not sober myself. Two extras bump against the hood as they walk past, laughing flirtatiously. They don't even turn around. I want to be enraged on your behalf. I want to leap out of the car and shout *Do you know who this is!* with your limp body hanging from my shoulders like a fox collar. But I'm not that person. Instead I imagine that we are an object, something very commonplace that is kept in an apartment for years and years and forgotten about, like a fern, or an ugly statuette. I imagine that everyone begins to head home; the director says *That's a wrap* and they turn off the lights and leave, and we sit here, just the two of us, long after our curfews have passed. Instead, someone raps on the windshield to let us know we'll be starting soon. You yawn and stretch, and I try not to look up your dress. You grunt *good morning* and use the passenger mirror to freshen up, but there is no passenger mirror because this isn't a car. Then they turn up the lights until all I can see is you and the lights and I imagine that we are the resurrected victims of a crash, driving past heaven.

Hasan Friggle is a student of fiction living in Providence, Rhode Island.